

Executive Interviews

During the course of this research project, Randall Travel Marketing, Inc. interviewed a diverse selection of local opinion leaders in the Fredericksburg region. A full listing of interviewees is not to be found in this report as each person's anonymity was guaranteed. The respondents fell into the following categories:

- Downtown Fredericksburg merchants
- Area attractions
- Lodging owners and general managers
- Commercial property owners and developers
- City and County leaders, officials, and staff
- Local residents

A summary of the overall findings follows:

Summary of Executive Interviews

Most of the respondents for these executive interviews were of the opinion that tourism in the FAT area is of critical importance to the economic impact of the region as well as to the long-term cultural and heritage preservation. Thus, tourism *matters* deeply to these leaders and to the jurisdictions.

Although there is some diversity of thought, the majority of respondents feel that the three jurisdictions have begun to cooperate in tourism marketing, and that it is now time to move forward to a more advanced level of cooperative marketing that embraces and enriches each of the three jurisdictions.

The majority of the respondents report that it is now time to bring tourism in the FAT region to a higher professional level. They believe it is time to create a new, professionally managed tourism entity that operates separately from economic development, and separately from the three jurisdictions. A new authority was suggested that would be funded by all three jurisdictions, with 100% of the tourism lodging taxes collected by the three jurisdictions allocated to the authority. Additionally, a percentage of the food and beverages taxes collected should be allocated to tourism promotion.

The new authority would have a board appointed by each of the three jurisdictions, and be comprised of stakeholders (hoteliers, attractions, restaurants, merchants, etc.) and those people most directly related and affected by tourism marketing.

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The consensus is that a new, experienced regional tourism director is required for staffing of this new authority. The ideal candidate for this job would be someone who has strong experience in heritage and historic regional tourism, demonstrates sound business practices, and is committed to preservation of the unique cultural and heritage quality of the three jurisdictions and sustainable tourism growth. Additionally, this person would not be perceived as being loyal or showing favoritism to any one of the three jurisdictions. Impartiality is critical.

Most of the respondents to these interviews were pleased with the commitment to research for tourism marketing and expressed a strong desire to see that solid “business practices” of research and strategic planning are instituted in any new organization. They want to see results measures and results reporting.

The leaders also expressed that increased strategic and targeted tourism marketing and promotional efforts are required. Although the respondents recommended a wide variety of potential tourism marketing practices, they virtually unanimously reported the desire for a focused, logical tourism marketing plan based on specific objectives for growth. Again, a wide variety of niche marketing recommendations were made for things such as family reunions, archaeology, day trip shoppers, classic car enthusiasts, golf, small meetings, sports/athletics, history clubs, etc. In listening to these respondents our team heard that there is currently a lack of clarity of a marketing direction, and the need for reassurance that a strategic marketing plan is developed based on reliable research. These people want results, and they want to know what is being done and why.

Also, the respondents want to see this authority operate as an economic partner with each of the three jurisdictions. They envision an authority that develops (and publicly reports) a listing of unmet tourism needs based on market research, and works with the three jurisdictions and the private sector to implement and develop new initiatives such as parking for Downtown Fredericksburg, convention facilities, new attractions, signage, etc.

Ideally, the respondents see this new entity as one that will engineer and provide on-going research and direction that will keep the development of tourism focused and moving forward.

In conducting these interviews RTM was impressed with the degree of commitment demonstrated by those interviewed. Although a variety of frustrations were reported, there is a clear and strong desire to see tourism continue to be enhanced and strategically grown. The residents of the region *want* the world to know about the unique heritage and history of Fredericksburg and the Counties of Spotsylvania and Stafford. They want visitors to come. And, they want to preserve the irreplaceable historic treasures of which they are stewards.

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A sampling of specific comments reported during the executive interviews follows:

- We need activities that bring high socio-economic visitor segments into downtown Fredericksburg.
- Parking is a major issue in downtown Fredericksburg – we need parking facilities.
- Elected officials need to understand that tourism is one of the best forms of economic impact this area will ever have.
- There's nothing to do in downtown Fredericksburg at night – except for restaurants.
- Bathrooms are a major issue in downtown Fredericksburg – we need public restrooms.
- Economic development and tourism marketing need to be separated.
- We need a strong tourism leader who can guide us, set objectives, and achieve results.
- Visitors do not understand the historical significance of Fredericksburg. We need to communicate more of the total historical image.
- The downtown Fredericksburg restaurants need to advertise cooperatively to gain outreach and lure more people downtown.
- The river front area needs a development vision.
- If research is conducted, we want to have it so we can better market our individual attractions.
- Signage – we need better signage to get people downtown.
- We need a cultural center that is alive in the evenings.
- We need tours of the historic neighborhoods and areas.
- We need a top, experienced, tourism professional who knows what other areas have done and can move FAT ahead.
- Need more diversity of product offerings in downtown (goods in stores).
- Do something about the aging shopping centers on Route 1.
- Our elected officials need to understand and support tourism and stop being territorial and petty.
- There is so much historical data that needs to be captured for use in tourism promotion – and no organization is doing this.
- Fredericksburg is the best “authentic” historic town in the wider region. It is not a contrived town like Williamsburg.
- Marketing 300 years of history may be too much. It's difficult to market because it is too broad.
- Downtown museums need better attendance.
- Tourism needs to be respectful of the total environment.
- We need to make sure we are getting more economic impact *per visitor*, not just more visitors.
- Need to resolve “downtown” vs. “olde town.”
- More marketing of packages that include specific attractions is needed.
- Tourism is the only thing the three jurisdictions have agreed upon.

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- Tourism marketing needs more money. The three jurisdictions need to at least double the investment in tourism marketing.
- The City Council and Boards of Supervisors need to think like businesspeople in planning for tourism. They need to think investment and return-on-investment – and not just be trying to make sure their jurisdiction gets promoted most heavily.
- FAT needs to track the number of visitors to other similar and close by destinations and attractions to measure our performance. For instance, if 700,000 people visit Monticello annually – why aren't that many people visiting Fredericksburg?
- There are 130,000 cars per day on I-95. Yet, what is on I-95 that makes them want to come in and see downtown Fredericksburg?
- There needs to be a better transit system for visitors.
- The Counties of Spotsylvania and Stafford need to get over their thinking that all money invested in a regional program goes to market Fredericksburg. They think too small and don't understand the return on investment to their County by marketing cooperatively.
- Our tourism marketing is just "shooting in the dark" – we need research that tells us what priorities are most likely to be successful.
- Residents support tourism. As long as they aren't stuck behind visitors in traffic. But they do appreciate the economic impact.
- Residents are concerned about traffic, high taxes, and losing the landscape they love in this area.
- To say we're the most historic city in America is foolish.
- To say "we have too much history" is dumb.
- We have no particular niche.
- We need to sell the Civil War – that is our biggest draw.
- The downtown area museums are working well together now – that was not so 10 years ago.
- Our tourism marketing is sometimes driven by the "squeaky wheel gets the grease" approach instead of a solid business plan which results measures.
- Tourism and economic development should be separated.
- We should focus on attracting heritage enthusiasts, families, retirees, and conventions.
- FAT needs to be a regional authority with stakeholders for guidance.
- We need to balance all the heritage and history with nature products in order to appeal to a wider audience.
- The downtown Fredericksburg merchants need to be open in the evenings.
- Tourism and economic development need to be restructured.

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Specific niche markets that were suggested:

- Sports/athletics: league sports, fans, and family followers
- Golf
- Family reunions
- Archeology
- Genealogy
- History clubs
- Leisure adults – retirees
- Conventions (numerous mentions)
- Northeast US
- Northern Virginia upper income day trip shoppers
- Groups (especially seniors)
- Families who have visited Williamsburg
- Civil War enthusiasts
- Revolutionary War enthusiasts
- Visitors who might buy a tour package including Williamsburg, Washington, etc.